DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 505 JC 730 144

AUTHOR Galvin, Kevin
TITLE A Study of the W Grade at Southwestern College, Fall 1971.
INSTITUTION Southwestern Coll., Chula Vista, Calif.
PUB DATE Feb 73
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Comparative Analysis; *Dropout Characteristics; *Failure Factors; *Grading; Institutional Research; *Low Achievement Factors; Post Secondary Education; Student Characteristics; Technical Reports

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors in attrition over which Southwestern College might exercise some control and through which experimentation could be conducted toward changing the patterns of attrition. Data were gathered from college files on every student who withdrew from one or more classes for the fall 1971 semester. A comparison was then made between the characteristics of the withdrawing student and those of the total student population. The comparison showed that minority students, day students, full-time students, students between 18 and 25 years old, and students receiving financial aid tended to withdraw at a significantly higher rate. Sex and units completed were not significantly related to student withdrawal. However, minority students did not withdraw from the college at a significant rate. The study indicates a relationship between W grades and ability. Forty-eight percent of the total student population received a W grade, but students who made up the Dean's List for fall 1971, representing 11% of the total student population, accounted for only 5% of the W grades. That marginal students receive W grades in place of D's (and the no longer used F grade) is suggested by the fact that students are still being disqualified at approximately the same rate as before the F grade was abolished. (KM)

ED 077505

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A STUDY OF THE W GRADE AT SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE FALL, 1971

Southwestern College
900 Otay Lakes Road
Chula Vista, California

JC 730 144

Prepared by The Research Office
Kevin Galvin, Coordinator of Research
February, 1973

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PURPOSE:

During the last five years Southwestern has experienced an increase in the number of W grades. This study was part of an attempt to isolate some of the factors which have produced this situation.

There are many factors which affect student retention--ability, motivation, the curriculum, methods of instruction grading and retention standards, and outside impinging forces (family, national crisis, accidents). This study is descriptive and attempts to determine if the W grade is related in any identifiable way to student characteristics, i.e., who withdraws? Is class withdrawal related to sex, ethnic status, ability, age, or units completed?

This study sheds some light on the role which the W grade plays in our instructional program. Has the W grade replaced the F grade for low ability students? Do students utilize the W grade to 'protect' their G.P.A.? Do students 'overload' their schedule at registration with the intention of dropping those classes which are time consuming, difficult, or uninteresting for them?

The purpose then of this study is to identify the factors in attrition over which the institution might exercise some control, and through which some meaningful experimentation might be conducted which could have implications for changing the patterns of attrition.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Every student who withdrew from one or more classes for the Fall, 1971 semester was identified by data processing from the student's history file. The following information was collected: classes dropped, sex, ethnic background, veteran status, whether high school graduate, whether financial aid was received, day/evening status, age, units completed, and whether that student's withdrawal from class represented his total withdrawal from the college. A comparison was then made between the characteristics of the withdrawing student and those of the total student population. On the basis of this data a z=score was obtained and the level of significance was placed at the 5% level. Results beyond the 1% level are characterized as highly significant. (Simply put "significant" results could be obtained 5 times or less in a hundred by chance alone while "highly significant" results could occur once in a hundred or less by chance alone.)

RESULTS OF THE STUDY:

During the Fall 1971 semester 8008 students were enrolled at census date and 3815 students (48%) withdrew from one or more classes (Cf., Table A and Table B). The majority of students who withdrew from class (56%) withdrew from a single class. (Cf., Table D). The next largest indentifiable block of students were those who completely withdrew from Southwestern (33% of those students who received a W grade). Table C graphically presents data on students who completely withdrew.

TABLE A
STUDENT'S RECEIVING ONE OR MORE W GRADES

STUDENT	1 W		2 Ws		3 Ws		4 Ws		5 Ws		Overall Total	
CHARACTERISTICS	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Males	1226	58	558	61	204	62	121	66	167	62	2276	60
Females	897	42	350	39	127	38	61	33	103	38	1539	40
Mexican-American	350	16	175	19	62	19	31	17	51	19	669	18
Caucasions	1702	80	679	75	254	77	138	76	212	78	2985	78
Blacks	29	1	20	2	6	2	6	3	4	1	65	2
Orientals	21	1	12	1	3	1	3	2	1	0	40	1
Indians	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	4	0
Others	20	1	21	2	5	2	4	2	2	1	52	1
Minorities	421	20	229	25	77	23	44	24	59	22	630	22
Wor Study	33	2	12	1	5	2	4	2	8	3	62	2
Financial Aid	35	2	13	1	7	2	3	2	7	3	65	2
Veterans	283	13	124	14	62	19	31	17	35	13	535	14
Non H.S. Grads	141	7	49	5	19	6	6	3	15	6	230	6
Students with Degrees	151	7	44	5	5	2	3	2	9	3	212	6

Using the student characteristic report on the 8008 students enrolled for Fall 1971 (Faculty Bulletin, Volume II, Number 24) a comparison was made between the total student population and the subpopulation composed of students who withdrew from one or more classes.

The null hypothesis (that there is no difference between the student who withdraws and the student who persists) led to the prediction that students would be represented in the W-population at approximately the same proportions as they are represented in the total population. As a result of this research the null hypothesis was rejected. Because the level of significance was placed at the .05 level we would be wrong in rejecting the null hypothesis only five times in a hundred. When our level of significance reaches the .01 level we would be wrong in rejecting the null hypothesis once in a hundred times.

In comparison with their distribution in the total student population this project showed that minority students, day students, full time students, students between 18 and 25 years old and students receiving financial aid tended to withdraw at a significantly higher rate.

White Americans, students with degrees, veterans and students over 26 years old tended not to withdraw from classes. The level of significance relative to this data was beyond the .01 level (i.e., highly significant).

Sex and units completed were not significantly related to student withdrawal.

The following table presents the results of this comparison:

TABLE B
STUDENTS RECEIVING A W GRADE COMPARED WITH THE TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION

STUDENT CHARACTERISTIC	W-POPULATION	TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION	z=SCORE
Male	59.66	60.0	z= .40
Female	40.34	40.0	z= .31
M. .can-American	17.54	14,8	z=3.67[b] Withdrawal
White	78.24	81.1	z=3.62[b] Persistence
Black	1.70	1.5	z= .82
Oriental	1.05	1.09	z= .20
Indians	0.10	0.09	z= .17
Others	1.36	1.2	z= .71
Minorities	21.46	18.84	z=3.30[b] Withdrawal
Veteran	14.02	18.0**	z=4.71[b] Persistence
Non H.S. Grads	6.03	6.9	z=1.88
Degree	5.6	7.6	z=4.17[b] Persistence
Dean's List	5.2	10.6	z=2.86[b] Persistence
Day Students	68.0	59.3	z=7.54[b] Withdrawal
Evening Students	32.0	40.7	z=3.63[b] Persistence
Full Time	45.58	40.2	z=4.44[b] Withdrawal
Part time	54.42	59.8	z=4.44[b] Persistence
Financial Aid	3.3	2.5	z=2.41[a] Withdrawal
0-14	52.37	52.9	z= .087
15-29	15.60	15.7	z= .06
30-44	11.45	11.4	z= .00
45+	20.58	20.0	z= .68
17 or less	3.9	3.2	z= .09
18	16.7	13.8	z=4.06[b] Withdrawal
19	15.3	11.9	z=4.96[b] Withdrawal
20	10.8	7.9	z=4.37[b] Withdrawal
21-25	28.6	26.6	z=2.26[a] Withdrawal
26+	24.59	36.6	z=11.31[b] Persistence

[a] Significant
[b] Highly Significant

Analysis of this data seems to suggest that ethnic status, affluence, and maturity are all closely related to student attrition. That students from low socioeconomic backgrounds withdraw from class at a higher rate was a predictable result of this research. An impressive body of research (Mesker & Knoell, McMillan, Karabel, and others) has led researchers to accept the hypothesis that "The rate of attrition at a college varies inversely with the class composition of its student population." Recent research has indicated that those students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to attach a lower sense of importance to college; they are likely to have less perceived parental encouragement for college; they are likely to have lower educational aspirations; and, they are more likely to express greater concern over matters of finance and employment.

NORCAL research at 22 California Community Colleges concluded that the attrition rate was highest at those institutions with the greatest racial mix and the smallest proportion of students declaring "transfer" goals.

Most of these studies were concerned with those students who completely withdrew from college. Interestingly, at Southwestern College minority students did NOT withdraw from the college at a significant rate (Cf., Table C). Indeed, at Southwestern the only groups that "totally withdrew" from the institution at an excessive rate were: 1. the part time; 2. evening student; 3. between the ages of 21-25; 4. with less than 14 units.

This study indicates a relationship between W grades and ability. Whereas, 48% of the total student population received a W grade, students who made up the Dean's List for Fall, 1971 represented 11% of the total student population and accounted for only 5% of the W grades. Moreover, since Dean's List honors are limited to those students who complete 12 or more units, few evening students are eligible for Dean's List. Among full time students, the top 26% were on the Dean's List and accounted for only 6% of the W's received by full time students. Thus, the hypothesis that bright students withdraw from class to preserve a high G.P.A. is not supported.

That marginal students receive W grades in place of D's (and the no longer used F grade) is suggested by the fact that we are still disqualifying students at approximately the same rate as we did before the F grade was abolished. (Presently, students are disqualified for excessive withdrawal whereas previously disqualification was based on negative grade points.) Moreover, members of the Admissions Committee suggest that they are still dealing with the same "type" of student. This whole question of the role of the W grade needs further investigation, yet, one point seems clear, Southwestern with its present grading policy (no F, liberal W) has prevented the college from being simply a revolving door for minorities. Minority groups are more likely to receive

one or more W grades, yet, they are not totally withdrawing, from the college in large numbers. Hopefully, these students remain in college long enough to develop the confidence and skills necessary to successfully complete their degree program. Additional research is clearly needed to decide these issues.

In considering "total-withdrawals" the fact that our full time students account for 40.2% of the total student population but only 11% of those who completely withdraw is highly significant. Only 138 out of 3219 full time students left the college. To grasp the implications of this finding it is necessary once again to look at the literature on student attrition. In a recent study (1971) NORCAL evaluated experimental programs to reduce attrition in 18 California Community Colleges and found that the most successful colleges were those that involved counseling as a major component. Tutorial assistance was also highly correlated with success in reducing attrition. At Southwestern all full time students meet with a counselor prior to selecting their program whereas part time and evening students are not required to meet with a counselor and generally do not take advantage of the evening counseling services provided. Tutorial assistance is not generally available to the evening student.

To our credit, veterans and students receiving financial aid actually tended to persist at a highly significant rate whereas other California institutions have reported high attrition rates for these groups.

That the college continues to perform a sorting out function is clear from our transfer record over the past years. The same proportion of our students are transferring and our transfer students continue to do better than "native" students in the State College and University system.

TABLE C
STUDENTS WHO COMPLETELY WITHDREW FROM SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE
COMPARED WITH THE TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION

CHARACTERISTIC	W-POPULATION %	TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION %	z=SCORE	REMARKS
Male	60.8	60.0	z= .18	
Female	39.2	40.0	z= .18	
Mexican-American	17.6	14.8	z= .81	
White	77.6	81.1	z= .93	
Black	2.4	1.5	z= .65	
riental	1.6	1.09	z= .45	
ndian	.0	0.09	---	
Other	.8	1.2	z= .41	

TABLE C (continued)
STUDENTS WHO COMPLETELY WITHDREW FROM SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE
COMPARED WITH THE TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION

CHARACTERISTIC	W-POPULATION %	TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION %	z=SCORE	REMARKS
Minorities	22.4	18.84	z= .96	
Veteran	6.4	18.0**	z=5.19[b]	Persistence
Non H.S. Grad	8.0	6.9	z= .45	
Degree	9.6	7.6	z= .75	
Day	36.12	59.3	z=15.85[b]	Persistence
Evening	63.88	40.7	z=15.85[b]	Withdrawal
Financial Aid	.72	2.5	z=6.02[b]	Persistence
0-14	75.2	52.9	z-5.75[b]	Withdrawal
15-29	13.6	15.7	z= .68	
30-44	5.6	11.4	z=2.77[b]	Persistence
45+	4.0	20.0	z=7.74[b]	Persistence
17 or less	0.8	3.2	z=2.93[b]	Persistence
18	7.2	13.8	z=2.82[b]	Persistence
19	14.40	11.9	z=0.79	
20	13.6	7.9	z=1.85	
21-25	34.4	26.6	z=2.51[b]	Withdrawal
26+	29.6	36.6	z=1.75	
Full time	11.0	40.2	z=28.10[b]	Persistence
Part time	89.0	59.8	z=28.10[b]	Withdrawal

** Estimated
[b] Highly Significant

From an analysis of data available on students who completely withdrew from classes in Fall, 1971 it was observed that students attending nights (.01 level), part time (.01 level), with less than 14 units completed, and between 21 and 25 (.05 level) were overly represented in the withdrawal population given their representation in the total student population.

Full time, day students, veterans, students who completed 30 or more units, and students in the 17 and 18 year old groups were less likely to withdraw from college.

Sex, ethnic background, high school status and degree status were not correlated with total withdrawal from college. Table C summarizes the research findings.

The accumulated data indicated that students withdrawing from one class and students who totally withdrew from college accounted for the majority of the W grades given for Fall, 1971. There were 2123 students who received one W (56% of the 3815 total) while 1254 students withdrew from the college (33% of the 3815 total). However these are not separate groups since many of the complete withdrawals were students who withdrew from one class.

Students with more than 45 units completed tended to withdraw from one class at a significantly higher rate (.05 level).

Veterans, students over 26 years of age, and students with less than 29 units completed withdrew from one class at a rate much lower than their representation in the population would suggest. The level of significance was beyond the .01 level.

Sex, ethnic background, high school graduation, degree status, day/evening enrollment, financial aid, and age were not significant characteristics of those students who withdrew from one class. Table D provides a complete breakdown of the results of this comparison.

Attention was paid to the possibility that students 'overloaded' their program at registration with the intention of withdrawing from that class which proves difficult or uninteresting to them. Yet, students who enrolled in 17 or more units did not withdraw from class as often as students with lighter case loads. Part of the reason for this can be attributed to the fact that those students seeking to take 17½ units or more received special counseling and are only allowed to enroll for extra hours with a counselor's approval.

TABLE D
STUDENTS WHO WITHDREW FROM 1 CLASS
COMPARED WITH THE TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION

CHARACTERISTIC	1-W POPULATION %	TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION %	z=SCORE	REMARKS
Male	57.7	60.0	z=1.9.	
Female	42.3	40.0	z=1.9	
Mexican-American	16.5	14,8	z=1.89	
White	80.2	81.1	z= .93	
Black	1.37	1.5	z= .46	
Oriental	.99	1.09	z= .42	
Indian	.05	0.01	z= .68	
ther	.94	1.2	z=1.06	
Minorities	19.85	18.84	z=1.29	

TABLE D
STUDENTS WHO WITHDREW FROM 1 CLASS
COMPARED WITH THE TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION
(continued)

CHARACTERISTIC	1-W POPULATION %	TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION %	z=SCORE	REMARKS
Veteran	13.3	18.0**	z=5.53[b]	Persistence
Non H.S. Grad	6.6	6.9	z= .50	
Degree	7.1	7.6	z= .79	
Day	58.93	59.3	z= .49	
Evening	41.07	40.7	z= .49	
Full time	39.38	40.2	z= .76	
Part time	60.62	59.8	z= .76	
Financial Aid	3.1	2.5	z=1.46	
0-14	50.82	52.9	z=2.81[b]	Persistence
15-29	13.66	15.7	z=2.83[b]	Persistence
30-44	11.16	11.4	z= .31	
45+	24.35	20.0	z=4.21[b]	Withdrawal
17 or less	3.53	3.2	z= .41	
18	13.85	13.8	z= .00	
19	12.53	11.9	z= .78	
20	9.80	7.9	z=3.47[b]	Withdrawal
21-25	29.30	26.6	z=2.44[a]	Withdrawal
26+	30.99	36.6	z=4.92[b]	Persistence

**Estimated
[a]Significant
[b]Highly Significant

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